

VALENTINE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Valentine, Nebraska

Annual Narrative Report

Calendar Year 1999

INTRODUCTION

Valentine National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established on August 4, 1935 under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act by Executive Order 7142. The purpose of the refuge as stated in the executive order is “as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.”

Acquisition funding came from Duck Stamp sales and the Emergency Conservation Fund Of 1933.

The 71,272-acre Valentine NWR is located in the Sandhills of north-central Nebraska. The Sandhills contain the largest remaining stands of mid and tall grass native prairie left in North America. The refuge is a unique and ecologically important component of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The refuge has about 49,000 acres of grassy, undulating sand dunes, 13,000 acres of sub-irrigated meadows, and 10,000 acres of shallow lakes and marshes. The refuge is home to 270 species of birds, 59 species of mammals, and 22 species of reptiles and amphibians. The refuge is important to nesting and migrating waterfowl and is also one of the few places where good numbers of sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chickens can be found in the same area.. Several threatened or endangered birds stop at the refuge during migration. Two listed plants and one listed insect are also found here. Most of the native flora and fauna found here historically are still present today.

The refuge is part of a complex administered from Fort Niobrara NWR. Valentine NWR is in Cherry County with a subheadquarters located on Hackberry Lake, 17 miles south of the town of Valentine on US 83 then 13 miles west on State Spur 16B.

A. Highlights

The Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Valentine National Wildlife Refuge was completed.

Little Hay Road was repaired and graveled.

Grouse hunting was again excellent on the refuge.

C. Land Acquisition

1. Land Acquisition

The Colburn Land Exchange was completed. In this trade 1,324 acres of refuge was traded for 1,080 acres of private lands owned by Dean Colburn. Habitat units 24B1, 24B2, 24B3, 24D(N), 24D(S), 12B4, 12B5, and small parts of 12B1, 12B2, and 12B3 were traded away. The land acquired was labeled as Habitat Units 37A, 37B, and 37C. The map shows the trade lands.

The possible trade of our Holt Creek Wildlife Management Area for the state Willow, Rat and Beaver Lakes Areas was on the agenda of the Nebraska Game and Parks Habitat Acquisition Committee. Most of the old buildings on Holt Creek WMA were sold and slowly moved off site by the buyers.

Fencing materials were picked up at the Haskel easement. The easement was part of the lease-back buy back provisions but was not filed with the deed due to changes in the farm bill during the lease period. The good news is we didn't go to the expense of constructing the fences for the easement. The bad news is that the easement was not able to be filed on a truly exceptional wetland/grassland complex. A lot of time and effort went into this project with no return.

The Larsen easement was also not filed due to the change in the farm bill.

D. Planning

1. Master Plan

Staff from the contractor doing the site plan for the complex were on site April 8-16 to learn about the refuges and gather information to be used in the plan. Regional Office staff also participated.

The 25 percent completion for the site plan being prepared under contract was received and commented on. The plan is costing us \$177,000. The preliminary plan received was incomplete and contained many errors. The level of detail was insufficient and many programs and facilities were not evaluated. Hopefully these short comings can be corrected.

The Valentine NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan was completed and signed off on in September. A lot of time and effort went into this extensive planning effort. The plan will be a good tool to guide us in managing the many programs on the refuge.

4. Compliance with Environmental and Cultural Resource Mandates

The Nebraska Department of Roads was provided information for preparing an environmental assessment for improvements to Highway 83 through the refuge. We requested upland and wetland mitigation, turtle underpasses, and endangered species consultation for the project. A local citizen is circulating a petition critical of the Department of Roads and the Fish and Wildlife Service for delays in completing the improvements.

Preliminary plans for the upgrade of Highway 83 through Valentine NWR were received. We have several concerns about the plans including impacts on wetlands, the threatened prairie-white fringed orchid, increase of the size of the right of way, and the abandoning parts of the existing road and building a new road alongside. We are working with USFW Enhancement to prepare comments on the project.

Several newspaper articles have appeared in the local and Omaha paper blaming the delay in upgrading Highway 83 through Valentine NWR on the refuge specifically endangered species and turtle crossings. The delay is in fact due to Department of Roads rejecting the original bid and unfamiliarity or reluctance to comply with regulations protecting the refuge and wildlife. A petition has also been circulated calling for the project to be completed in the summer of 2000. We have also received several congressionals.

E. Administration

1. Personnel

Permanent Staff

Asst Refuge Manager Mark Lindvall
Biologist Len McDaniel
Maintenance Worker Dave Kime
Range Tech - Firefighter Matt Plagenz

Seasonal Staff

Zach Brashears - Firefighter
Randy Fenster - Firefighter
Chris Prentis - Firefighter

In June Refuge Operations Specialist Mark Lindvall transferred from the Fort Niobrara Office to

the Valentine Office. Previously Lindvall worked as a Complex employee on both Fort Niobrara and Valentine NWRs. Now he works as the refuge manager for Valentine NWR.

Rob Hirshboeck started as a park ranger this month and attended the 40 hour LE refresher in Arizona. Rob will be doing law enforcement and public use work for the Complex. He is a career seasonal employee.

Firefighter Matt Plagenz transferred to CMR Refuge in Montana. His last day here was December 18. He is a fine individual and great worker and will be missed.

8. Other

Maintenance worker Kime attended the maintenance workshop held at Qivira NWR in Kansas.

Asst. Manager Lindvall attended the Nebraska Chapter of the Wildlife Society annual meeting in Halsey, NE. Manager Huber gave a presentation on the Comprehensive Management Plans for Fort Niobrara and Valentine NWRs.

Maintenance Worker Kime, Biologist McDaniel, and Manager Lindvall attended the FWS Boating Safety Class held in Valentine April 20-22.

F. Habitat Management

2. Wetlands

A grant proposal was sent to DU for repair of the Calf Camp Dike. It looks good for funding and they will be down in February to look at the project.

7. Grazing

Planning was done for the Valentine NWR habitat program. We now have 8 permittees and will be putting a few units out for bid. The new grazing rate of \$19.00 per AUM was received and will help bring us up to market value. In 1999 we started using the USDA Agricultural Statistics Board report to set grazing fees. In the past we have periodically done our own grazing rate surveys to set a base rate. The 99 program will again emphasize spring grazing treatments and short-duration grazing.

Eight grazing permittees were in and signed up for the 1999-2000 habitat management program on Valentine NWR. As in the past we will be using a combination of mainly spring grazing treatments and short duration grazing. Two units were also put out for bid, something we had not done before. One bid for \$1,650 (\$12.50/AUM) was received for the 22 days of grazing.

Long time refuge permittee Elver Lord informed us that he will not be requesting a grazing permit for the year 2000. He is retiring.

Refuge permittees were briefed by the refuge manager on how plans in the Comprehensive

Conservation Plan will affect their permits

Refuge Permittee Orville Gallino's hired man mowed unit 32B2 before the refuge crew could search for and mark the white-fringed orchids. One orchid was found that was mowed and undoubtedly others were also cut.

1999 HABITAT MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

<u>treatment</u>	<u>units</u>	<u>acres</u>	<u>AUMs</u>
rest			
rest R	189	30,807 -	
rest (portion hayed) H-R	18	4,525	-
subtotal	207	35,032 -	
spring			
spring grazing treatment SGT	25	4,522	1,416
early spring short duration			
ES-SD 1-6 days	4	1,040	212
ES-SD-6-9 days	6	1,387	446
subtotal	35	6,949	2,074
summer			
short duration summer			
SD-S 1-3 days	30	4,005	860
SD-S 4-7 days	33	9,670	1,742
SD-S 8-15 days	4	2,516	476
summer S 15-27 days	0	-	-
subtotal	67	16,241	3,078
fall F or F-H	6	990	496
winter W or FD-L	5	1,570	913
hayed H	22	714	-
gov't horse	1	20	12
prescribed fire P	7		301 -

**note that acres when totaled exceeds the approximately 61,661 acres of upland on the refuge due to

double
treatme
nt of
some
units.

9. Fire Management

Prescribed Fires and Wildfires at Ft. Niobrara/Valentine NWRC 1999

Date	Name/Type <small>WF=Wildfire/RX= Prescribed Fire</small>	Ownership	Comments
1-8-99	T.Davis / WF	Private	Neighbor who had shop area catch fire. Dave Kime responded from Hackberry HDQRS. No initial attack.
3-16 to 3-18-99	Thedford / WF	Private	Largest Fire in Nebraska History. (74,000 acres). Several Firefighters received awards for duties on fire. Spark from Power line was the cause. One Volunteer Firefighter died. Several Hundred cattle dead also.

4-8-99	Johnstown / WF	Nat. Conservancy	320 acres. Aircraft spotted fire and was put out by rainfall shortly after.
6-2-99	FT. N. 36A / WF	FWS	.1 acres (lightning)
6-23-99	VLT 1A / WF	FWS	1.5 acres(Power line)
7-15-99	Heelan Ranch / WF	Private	4.9 acres(lightning)
7-22-99	Merritt / WF	State	Engines Dispatched but not initial attack.
8-3-99	Simmons / WF	Private	5 acres (Power line)
7-31-99	FA#1 / WF	Private	Neighbor smelled smoke and reported it to Project Leader Royce Huber. No Fire was located.
8-20-99	Mckelvie / WF	USFS	Up to 10 fires located in and around Mckelvie NF. 4 FWS engines responded initial attacking 3 fires. Rain put most fires out.(640 total acres burned)
8-20-99	Gordon CK / WF.	Private	1 acre
8-27-99	VLT 21A4 / WF	FWS	1 acre. Cigarette thrown from vehicle along state HWY. 83
8-27-99	George Ford / WF	Private	Lightning caused fire burned 200 acres in Cody/Kilgore districts.
9-2-99	FA#2 / WF	FWS	Smell of Smoke in town with east wind was reason for investigating possible fire on FT. Niobrara. No fire was found.

5-17-99	W. River Strip / RX	FWS(Ft. Niobrara)	118 acres. Objective was to reduce Easter Red Cedar and enhance Native Sandhill Vegetation. Excellent results!
5-21 to 5-22-99	North Trap / RX	FWS(Ft. Niobrara)	23.2 acres. Timber Stand Burn. Create Gaps and reduce Eastern Red Cedars.
5-12-99	18C1 / RX	FWS(Valentine)	80 acres. Red Cedar reduction and Native Sandhill Prairie Enhancement
5-8-99	Pelican Y / RX	FWS(Valentine)	7 acres. Smooth Brome Reduction and Native Sandhill Prairie maintenance. Looks good!
5-8-99	Calf Camp / RX	FWS(Valentine)	36 acres. Eastern Red Cedar and Smooth Brome Reduction. Warm Season Grass response is excellent!
5-12-99	HU 18b6 / RX	FWS(Valentine)	82.7 acres. Eastern Red Cedar and Kentucky Blue Grass Reduction burn. Excellent response from native warm season grasses.
5-19-99	S. Pony&Center/RX	FWS(Valentine)	48 acres. Excellent kill on Easter Red Cedars <3'. Warm season grass response was good.
5-23-99	N. Marsh / RX	FWS(Valentine)	19.3 acres. Smooth Brome Reduction and Native

			Vegetation Enhancement. Excellent results!
5-23-99	W. Duck / RX	FWS(Valentine)	28 acres. Smooth Brome Reduction and Native Vegetation Enhancement. Outstanding growth on warm season grasses.
5-11/5-24/5-26-99	Overlook / RX	FWS(Ft. Niobrara)	28 acres. Experiment on Hairy Vetch reduction. Results look positive but won't know for sure until spring of 2000'

In 1999 Bill Waln left Fort Niobrara to become the FMO at Quivara National Wildlife Refuge in Kansas. Bill had previously served 12 years as a firefighter for the complex. Also leaving was the Zone FMO, Jim Kelton who was stationed at Fort Niobrara. Jim took a job in the regional office as the Regional Fire Manager for Region 6. Jim was stationed at Fort Niobrara for almost 4 years. Tim Klukas who was the previous AFMO at Wichita Mountains NWR in Oklahoma has been selected for the new position of Station Fire Management Officer. Tim will manage the fire program for both Valentine and Ft. Niobrara Refuges.

In 1999 fire crew consisted of one career seasonal fire fighter (Matt Plagenz) who was stationed at Pony Lake on the Valentine Refuge. Also, Don Jensen took over a fire crew supervisory roll at Ft. Niobrara to fill in the gap left by Bill Waln. Don was in his second year at Ft. Niobrara and brings a lot of good fire experience with him that he obtained while fighting fire in the Northwest. Ryan Cumbow also returned for his second season. Ryan was stationed at Ft. Niobrara. Also, as a first year fire fighter Kirk Jess from Valentine Nebraska was also stationed at Ft. Niobrara. On the Valentine Refuge stationed at Hackberry was three new firefighters as well. Chris Prentis from Connecticut, Zach Brashears from Nebraska, and Randy Fenster from Nebraska. All new fire fighters attended S-130 , S-190 in North Dakota. Other training received by first year fire fighters was S-211 (water and pumps) put on at Rainwater Basin. Matt Plagenz went to the Prescribed Fire Training Center in Florida. This was a four week training assignment that was an excellent hands on experience in Prescribed Fire. Matt also went on a four week detail to Wichita Mountains NWR where he was involved in Prescribed Burns in Oklahoma and Texas at various Refuges.

A cool wet spring slowed Prescribed Fire activities at Ft. Niobrara and Valentine Refuges. Fire Crew did manage to conduct 10 prescribed burns totaling 470 acres. Wildfires in the area resembled an average year with 14 fires. The largest fire in the History of Nebraska started on March 16,1999 in the Mullen fire district. Four type six engines and fire fighters (Mark Lindvall, Matt Plagenz, Casey Mcpeak, Jim Kelton, Dave Kime, Len Mcdaniel, Jim

Sellers, and Gary Coleman, were dispatched to the fire. Two days later 74,000 acres of rangeland had burned destroying one home, several ranch buildings, hundreds of livestock, killing one volunteer firefighter, and nearly burning up the town of Thedford. Town of Thedford was evacuated as Refuge Firefighters and Fire Fighters from all over the state directed the flames away from town. The Thedford fire was approximately 45 miles long and up to 10 miles wide in some areas. This fire was located 20 miles south of the Valentine Refuge. All fire fighters from complex that were involved in controlling the fire received an award for their efforts.

10. Pest Control

Canada thistle patches were mowed during July. More patches of this noxious weed are being spotted each year. Mowing does little more than stop seed spread.

Leafy spurge in unit 2B3 was checked. The area where the flea beetles were released shows a reduction at the release site. Unfortunately the spurge is expanding in other areas along the edge of the patches.

12. Wilderness and Special Areas

The proposed wilderness at Valentine NWR is included in a package of wilderness study areas to be designated as wilderness.

Asst. Manager Lindvall is serving on the steering committee for a training on managing visitor use in wilderness to be held in Salt Lake City in November.

13. WPA Easement Monitoring

A special use permit was issued to the landowner of the Wagner easement. The permit authorizes grazing with a spring grazing treatment for exotic grass control. Discussions were also started on cross fencing the area and setting up a grazing system to move from renovation of the area to maintenance of the grasslands.

The Klammer private lands project was completed. About 300-400 cedar trees were cut along a riparian area in Brown County. The removal will help return native prairie to this area.

H. Public Use

1. General

Asst. Manager Lindvall attended a meeting of the civic center committee in Valentine. They are planning what uses to accommodate. We have raised the possibility of the Fish and Wildlife Service, Park Service, Forest Service, and Nebraska Game and Parks having a shared visitor center in the building.

The CCC Fire Tower observation tower project was submitted to engineering and contracting for

preparation of a bid package for construction. Our volunteer group backed out of doing the construction for us.

Asst. Manager Lindvall gave a program on managing small acreages for wildlife as part of the NRCS sponsored Small Acreage Workshop held in Valentine on May 15.

Asst. Manager Lindvall was a judge for the 4 H Habitat Management Contest held at Halsey National Forest on June 5.

8. Hunting

Hunting pressure for the grouse opener was light. Hunters had good success. For the entire season hunters turned in 57 prairie chicken, 554 sharptail, and 2 unknown wings to the voluntary hunter wing collection boxes.

The new combined hunting and fishing leaflet was completed in the new required format for USFWS brochures.

Pheasant season opened on October 30 with a few hunters. Pheasant numbers remain low on the refuge.

Duck season opened on October 4. Numbers of duck hunters is up this year with several groups of out of state hunters out each day. The increase may be due to articles on duck hunting in the Sandhills that appeared in DU magazine and Sports Afield. The refuge was mentioned in both. Many hunters also visited Yellowthroat WMA which was featured in the DU story.

Rifle deer season ran from November 13 through 21. There were more than the usual number of hunters in the Sandhills Unit on the refuge. This may be due to private landowners closing of their lands due to the high fire danger.

Muzzle loader deer hunting opened on December 9 and ran for 2 weeks. This form of hunting is gaining in popularity in the state and on the refuge. At least 20 hunters were out and we know of 5 deer taken.

9. Fishing

Ice went off Valentine NWR fishing lakes on February 4 ending a very short season that started on December 20, 1998.

Review of text and maps was provided for the author of the *Nebraska Lake Guide* for the section on the fishing lakes at Valentine NWR.

Ice fishing got off to a slow start due to warm weather. The first people out were on 17 December. Shortly after warm weather again opened up the lakes. This is the second year in a row with late ice.

11. Wildlife Observation

Blinds for observing prairie chickens and sharptails were placed at Valentine NWR. We had a lot of people wanting into the blinds in late March, really before the birds are active.

17. Law Enforcement

Three of our present four refuge officers have or are in the process of applying for 6C retirement based on LE work or a combination of LE and fire work.

Refuge Officers Sellers and Lindvall attended the annual LE inservice training in Marrana, AZ in January.

One violation notice for fishing with too many lines was written. Warning letters were sent to 4 individuals for being on the refuge before light and one for alcohol.

Two fishermen were issued violation notices, one for alcohol and one for a fish size limit violation.

A vandal threw a rock and broke the windshield of the MAC truck which was parked in the refuge store yard.

Refuge officers Kime and Lindvall attended the fall LE refresher held at Fort Niobrara on August 25-26. The refresher included requal, legal updates, and a demonstration of ground fighting provided by Nebraska Game and Parks wardens.

A hunter was cited for shooting a pied-billed grebe on the opening weekend of duck season.

Two hunters were cited for possession of lead shot while hunting on the refuge. One deer hunter was cited for failure to tag a deer and one for shooting a deer in a closed area.

I. Equipment and Facilities

2. Rehabilitation

The repair of the Little Hay Road was completed under contract. The contractor did a very good job on the road. The project cost about \$1,000,000 for 9 miles of gravel road. The contractor pulled up and compacted a good road bed and the applied a base course of large rock. The only problem with the road is that the large sharp rocks caused a rash of flat tires. The rock cuts the sidewall and ruins the tires. Small rock will need to added to the base to cure this problem. The road shoulders on the newly rebuilt Little Hay Road were hayed by refuge staff to prevent wind erosion in the sandy soils.

The chicken house, fur shed, and outhouse in the yard at Pony Lake were torn down and hauled to the dump.

The Calf Camp Dike at Valentine NWR was repaired by adding sand and rip rap and lowering the water level. The trail across the dike was badly eroded by wave action.

Parking lots and boat ramps on Pelican, West Long, and Hackberry Lake were leveled with sand in preparation for graveling. Refuge staff did this work. Rock was then hauled and placed on the parking lots. Funds for the project came from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and USFW through a Challenge Cost Share Grant. Staff from the Valentine Fish Hatchery spread the rock. Extra rock was stockpiled at West Long and will be used to repair the road into that lake's boat ramp.

J. Other Items

3. Credits

Matt Plagenz wrote the Fire Management Section in 1999. Mark Lindvall wrote the remainder of the report in 2003 based on his sections of the monthly activity reports done in 1999.